

America Secedes from the Empire, 1775–1783

And if ever there was a just war since the world began, it is this in which America is now engaged. . . . We fight not to enslave, but to set a country free, and to make room upon the earth for honest men to live in.

Thomas Paine, The Crisis, 1776

Prologue: Following the bloodshed at Lexington, the colonists raised a nondescript army and put George Washington in command. The undisciplined and unreliable amateur soldiers exasperated their leader, and not until later in the war was a nucleus of several thousand trained veterans whipped into line. Meanwhile the colonists, goaded by harsh British acts, finally declared their independence in 1776. They kept their flickering cause alive with secret French aid until 1778, when France formed an alliance with them following the decisive American victory over General John Burgoyne at Saratoga in 1777. Spain and Holland ultimately entered the general conflict against the British. With much of the rest of Europe unfriendly, Britain found that the war had become too big to handle. Following a crushing defeat by a joint Franco-American force at Yorktown in 1781, the British decided to cut their losses and come to terms with their rebellious subjects. The final treaty was signed in 1783. Meanwhile, the emerging republic struggled to define the guiding principles of its foreign policy.

A. General Washington in Command

1. Washington Scorns Independence (1775)

Jonathan Boucher, a prominent Virginia clergyman who had married a wealthy woman, was so outspoken a Loyalist and an Anglican that he was ultimately burned in effigy by Patriots. He had tutored George Washington's stepson and was on terms of dinner-table friendship with the future general. At the time of which he writes, the

¹From *Reminiscences of an American Loyalist*, p. 109, edited by Edmund S. Bouchier. Copyright 1925 by Houghton Mifflin Company.

colonists were fighting near Boston for a redress of grievances, not for independence, and the newly appointed George Washington was about to join them as their commander. What does Boucher's account of the following incident reveal about Washington's character and the aims of the Patriots?

I happened to be going across the Potomac to Alexandria [Virginia] with my wife and some other of our friends, exactly at the time that General Washington was crossing it on his way to the northward, whither he was going to take command of the Continental Army. There had been a great meeting of people, and great doings in Alexandria on the occasion; and everybody seemed to be on fire, either with rum, or patriotism, or both.

Some patriots in our boat huzzaed, and gave three cheers to the General as he passed us; whilst Mr. Addison and myself contented ourselves with pulling off our hats. The General (then only Colonel) Washington beckoned us to stop, as we did, just, as he said, to shake us by the hand. His behavior to me was now, as it had always been, polite and respectful, and I shall forever remember what passed in the few disturbed moments of conversation we then had.

From his going on the errand he was, I foresaw and apprised him of much that has since happened; in particular that there would certainly then be a civil war, and that the Americans would soon declare for independency. With more earnestness than was usual with his great reserve, he scouted my apprehensions, adding (and I believe with perfect sincerity) that if ever I heard of his joining in any such measures, I had his leave to set him down for everything wicked.

2. Washington's Deep Discouragements (1775–1776)

General Washington's homespun army of plowmen and artisans, gathered around Boston, was an ill-disciplined force. It may not have frightened the British, but it certainly worried its commander. Washington's complaints, recorded in letters and repeated endlessly, are most revealing. Who and what were responsible for his chief difficulties?

[September 21, 1775, to the President of Congress] It gives me great pain to be obliged to solicit the attention of the honorable Congress to the state of this army. . . . But my situation is inexpressibly distressing, to see the winter fast approaching upon a naked army, the time of their service within a few weeks of expiring, and no provision yet made for such important events. Added to this, the military chest is totally exhausted; the paymaster has not a single dollar in hand; the commissary-general assures me he has strained his credit to the utmost for the subsistence of the army. The quartermaster-general is precisely in the same situation; and the greater part of the army are in a state not far from mutiny, upon the deduction from their stated allowance. I know not to whom I am to impute this failure; but

²J. C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931), vol. 3, p. 512; vol. 4, pp. 124–125, 243.

I am of opinion, if the evil is not immediately remedied, and more punctually observed in future, the army must absolutely break up.

[November 28, 1775, to Joseph Reed] What an astonishing thing it is that those who are employed to sign the Continental bills should not be able, or inclined, to do it as fast as they are wanted. They will prove the destruction of the army, if they are not more attentive and diligent. Such a dearth of public spirit and want of virtue, such stock-jobbing and fertility in all the low arts to obtain advantages of one kind or another, in this great change of military arrangement, I never saw before, and pray God I may never be witness to again. What will be the ultimate end of these manoeuvres is beyond my scan. I tremble at the prospect.

We have been till this time enlisting about three thousand five hundred men. To engage these I have been obliged to allow furloughs as far as fifty men a regiment, and the officers, I am persuaded, indulge as many more. The Connecticut troops will not be prevailed upon to stay longer than their term (saving those who have enlisted for the next campaign, and mostly on furlough), and such a dirty, mercenary spirit pervades the whole that I should not be at all surprised at any disaster that may happen.

In short, after the last of this month our lines will be so weakened that the minute men and militia must be called in for their defense. These, being under no kind of government themselves, will destroy the little subordination I have been laboring to establish, and run me into one evil whilst I am endeavoring to avoid another. But the lesser must be chosen. Could I have foreseen what I have, and am likely to experience, no consideration upon earth should have induced me to accept this command. . . .

[January 14, 1776, to Joseph Reed] . . . I have often thought how much happier I should have been if, instead of accepting of a command under such circumstances, I had taken my musket on my shoulder and entered the ranks; or, if I could have justified the measure to posterity and my own conscience, had retired to the back country, and lived in a wigwam. If I shall be able to rise superior to these and many other difficulties which might be enumerated, I shall most religiously believe that the finger of Providence is in it, to blind the eyes of our enemies. For surely, if we get well through this month, it must be for want of their knowing the disadvantages we labor under.

3. The Unreliable Militia (1776)

Washington's makeshift army, after finally forcing the British out of Boston in March 1776, was badly defeated later in the year while defending New York City. On one occasion Washington tried to beat the fleeing militia into line with the flat of his sword. From the discouraging letter that he wrote several weeks later to the president of Congress, determine why he regarded the militiamen as poor fighters, poor soldiers, and prone to desertion.

To place any dependence upon militia is assuredly resting upon a broken staff. Men just dragged from the tender scenes of domestic life, unaccustomed to the din

³J. C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (1931), vol. 6, pp. 110–112 (September 24, 1776).